

## all these to me by lymricks

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**Summary:**

“I got our room key,” Billy says.

“Our...?”

“Alphabetical,” Billy answers, shrugging.

Or: Three times Steve and Billy share (a bed, a meal, the truth) and one time they *share* (a virus).

## all these to me

### Author's Note:

- For [CastelloMargot56](#).

"What's going on? How are you faring--  
dearest, sweetest,  
best of friends--you know you are all these  
to me."

-Euripides, Orestes (tr. Anne Carson)

### I.

"It's going to be a great experience and I won't take no for an answer. Maybe it'll help you figure out what you want in life. You're running out of time to decide," is his dad's closing line when Steve reluctantly hands over the permission slip for the trip. Three days in Chicago, touring state of the art research facilities.

It's January of his senior year and Steve has had enough *state of the art research facilities* to last him his entire fucking life, thanks so much, but his dad practically rips the slip from his hands, signs it, and hands over the money.

Steve gives it to the teacher. On a sunny, frigid Friday, he settles into the four thousand hour long bus ride and ducks down in his seat, doesn't look at anyone, shoves headphones over his ears and shuts his eyes. He'd gotten to school early so he could grab a window seat near the front of the bus. He figured that was his best bet not to have a seat partner.

The seat next to him sinks, though, a few minutes later. When Steve opens his eyes, he's staring into crystal clear blue. "No," Steve says, blinking at him. "There is a whole bus."

"I want to sit here, pretty boy," Billy says with a wicked grin.

Steve considers the pros and cons of beating himself to death against the window. Instead, he crosses his arms over his chest and sumps

further in the seat. He's not exactly proud of it, but the next words out of his mouth are, "How did you even afford this trip anyway?" Billy brings out something mean in him, something sharp and defensive. It leaves a rotten taste in Steve's mouth, because it's the kind of question he would have asked Before. Tommy would have laughed and backed him up, Carol would have told absolutely everyone.

This isn't Before, though, and if he expects Billy to bristle, he's disappointed. Billy winks. "Scholarship. Some of us are *exceptional* students, Harrington. And by that I mean me."

So Steve gets the karma he deserves for trying to be an asshole when the sting of his own mediocre academics blooms in his chest, turns his cheeks pink. He wants to say *I helped save the fucking world* and he wants to say *you're not going to amount to anything* and he wants to throw around a word like *trash*, but even the thought leaves a bad taste in his mouth and there's no Tommy or Carol to back his play and he--doesn't really want to spend the next four thousand hours on a bus bickering with Billy, so he turns resolutely back toward the window and resolves not to say anything at all.

Approximately one hour in to the bus ride, Billy's knee hits his and stays there.

Billy's warm through the fabric of both their jeans, and when Steve glances at him out of the corner of his eye, he's slumped in his seat, reading. Steve can't see the title of the book, but Billy's chewing on the corner of his lip, eyes flicking across the pages in a way that says it's good. Steve scoots his knee back and goes back to staring out the window.

A few seconds later, Billy's knee bumps against his again and stays there.

Steve frowns and turns again to look at Billy. He's still staring just as intently at the book. When he turns the page, he doesn't even look up, just keeps reading,

Again, Steve moves his knee. Again, Billy's knee follows him. Steve's now so close to the window he doesn't have anywhere to go. He stays

there, watching highway signs slip by, feeling his leg cramp up, feeling squished and tired, feeling the heat of Billy through the denim of his jeans for what feels like a hundred miles, but it's not that long. It's maybe five minutes. Steve gives in, cramped and tired and a little on edge the closer they get to Chicago. He wonders if they'll see the state of the art facility where Hopper brought Will not all that long ago.

Steve lets his posture relax. He pushes his knee against Billy's. When he looks up, Billy's smiling, but it could just be the book.

Honestly, it's nice to feel something so solidly human. Even if it does belong to Billy Hargrove. Steve shuts his eyes, dozes off.

It's a long day once they get to Chicago. They're seeing the first of three labs, getting a tour, learning about the science. Steve's fine right up until they walk in the front door and a few men and women in lab coats come out to greet them. Then he just sort of--stops moving.

He wasn't really there, for that, but he reasons that the bad men are the bad men, and they wore white coats and they worked in a lab like this and it probably smelled like this and they brought monsters into the world with faces that opened to a hundred thousand teeth and they could be here *right now* right below the floor and--

All the breath rushes out of his body when Billy crashes into him. "Jesus, Harrington," Billy says, shoving his shoulder. "Keep it moving."

Steve wants to go the fuck home right the fuck now. He doesn't move.

"Harrington," Billy says, shoving his shoulder again, but Steve doesn't budge. The other students filter around behind them, filling up the spaces at the front, but Billy's still standing there next to him. "Harrington," Billy repeats, a little more insistent. "What, *now* you decide to plant your feet? Get out of the fucking way," but he's not exactly leaving.

All the breath in Steve's lungs had rushed out of him when Billy

crashed into him and it's, like, he's not going to panic, yet, or anything, but he's having a little trouble getting any more air back into his lungs.

"I can't," Steve says, feels the edges of panic pressing behind his eyes, against his stomach. "I can't breathe," and he's not really panicking, yet, but it's coming, because this lab is huge and white and there are maybe monsters underneath the floor.

"Yes you can," Billy says, and Steve's a little started when Billy steps around in front of him, filling his view. "If you can talk, you can breathe, so just take a second, all right?" Billy's eyes are crystal clear and they're just about the only thing Steve can see, so he focuses on them, how calm they look, the brighter spots of blue that dot his irises. Billy takes a slow, purposeful breath in and exhales, then does it again. Steve's body responds, mimics the action.

The first inhalation isn't enough. Steve sucks in a gasp of fresh air, feels a little less like he's being swallowed whole by the building he's standing in.

"What the fuck?" Billy says once Steve's breathing again. "You're white as a fucking ghost and that's saying something because you come from *Indiana*."

Steve pushes past him. "It's nothing," he says quick, on edge. He shoves past everyone, to the front of the group. He spends the next twenty minutes of the tour feeling Billy's eyes on the back of his neck.

They're going into an actual facility--they get goggles, facemasks, the whole deal. A girl from Steve's biology class roles her eyes, says that they're just trying to impress them, that what's in this room isn't really that big of a deal. It's just a high school trip. It's not like they'll show them any of the cool stuff.

Steve comes to a stop again at the threshold of the room. Again, people step around him. Again, Steve feels like walking into that room makes him a part of something that he never wants to know again.

A hand presses, warm, against the small of his back. Steve glances to the side and sees Billy, face as nonchalant as it had been on that bus earlier. Billy's fingers dig in, "We're gonna get left behind," he's saying, but he's looking around like he's curious. The whole experience is a little surreal. Steve wonders if Billy's chewing at his lip under that facemask. "Let's go, Harrington," Billy says, but his voice doesn't sound like it normally does, and maybe it's just the mask, but it might be something else, too.

Billy's hand is still on his back. Steve takes the first step into the room, then the second. He doesn't stop breathing and Billy doesn't let go. Even when, eventually, Billy drops his hand because they're in a room full of people they go to school with and that's fucking *weird*, Billy stays close.

It's strange, Steve thinks, that Billy Hargrove is the reason he's going to get through this field trip without embarrassing himself in front of everyone, but also, Steve's seen stranger this year and last, so.

~

"Room assignments are alphabetical by gender," the lead teacher is droning on. They're all huddled in the lobby of the hotel in Chicago and he keeps *shushing* them because they all keep talking. Steve's got his backpack slung over one shoulder and is leaning against what he assumes is meant to be a decorative column, but it's super fucking ugly, and he just wants to get the key and go to bed.

The day had been exhausting. They'd walked everywhere and Steve had been on edge *the whole time*. Billy, he'd figured, would get bored and wander off to flirt or fight with someone else, but he'd never been more than a few steps away from Steve the whole rest of the day, even once the lab tour had ended and Steve had stepped back outside, gulping in deep breaths of fresh, non-scientific air gratefully.

Steve hadn't just been grateful for the fresh air, honestly. Billy had pushed him through every door they'd had to walk through. The elevator, though, had been the worst. The feeling of going down into the depths of--

Leaning against his column, Steve shuts his eyes and sucks in a slow

and steady breath, then exhales. He pictures Billy breathing with him that morning, tries to mimic the action of it. He knows he's being irrational, is the thing, and it just makes him angrier. He hadn't even really been there. It just seems like no one else is having such a hard fucking time with things.

"Harrington," Billy says, suddenly too close. Steve can feel his breath on his ear and he shivers, but doesn't jump. Billy's been too close--just close enough, honestly--all day. Steve's not surprised to find him here now.

When Steve opens his eyes, all the students are filing away, heading toward the elevator. Steve's so fucking tired. It's like, 11:30pm and he's spent all day on a bus with Billy Hargrove or living out some weird fucking variations of his nightmares with Billy Hargrove on this terrible fucking field trip. "What?" Steve says, irritable, scrubbing a hand through his hair and adjusting his backpack on his shoulder.

"I got our room key," Billy says.

"Our...?"

"Alphabetical," Billy answers, shrugging.

Steve groans. "Right. Okay, let's just go," and then he's pushing off the column and heading toward the elevators, only when he gets there, he hesitates, looking at all the fucking classmates waiting there and thinking about how small it will be, and thinking about how it'll feel the same as the elevator in the lab had, earlier.

"I'm not waiting in this fucking line," Billy says, sounding bored and loud. A woman walking past them, heels clicking on the lobby floor, looks scandalized. "Let's just take the stairs, Harrington," and then he's walking somewhere to the left and Steve follows.

The stairwell is silent and a little cold, all smooth concrete and metal railings. Steve gets the impression that it's not meant for guest use. "How'd you know about stairs?"

Billy gives him a look like he's stupid. "In case of fire," he says like

he's quoting a manual, "Take the stairs. Every place has them."

"Yeah, but you just like--found them. Also, I don't think we're supposed to be in here?"

"You complaining? We can go take the elevator if you really want," Billy says, and there's an edge to it. Steve falls silent. They're going up the next flight when Billy says, "My mom cleans hotels in California. I grew up running around in stairs like these when I didn't go to school."

"Cleans?" Steve asks, before he can stop himself. The present tense surprises him. He'd always just assumed--

"Court ordered custody," Billy says, not looking at Steve when he says it. "My dad is better suited to parenting," and there's something in his voice, angry and--brittle, maybe--all at once, that Steve doesn't really understand.

"That sucks," Steve says, because he thinks it probably does, and Billy's voice sounds like it does.

Billy shrugs. "Is what it is," he says. "She probably shouldn't have let me skip so much school. Jesus, thank fuck, I'm so tired of climbing stairs." He pushes open the door to the seventh floor as he speaks, looks left and right, scoping out the signs, and Steve's tired enough that he just lets Billy do it, just follows behind him.

Billy unlocks the room and they both walk in. Billy walks right past the light switch, but Steve hits it as soon as he sees it. The hotel room is a little cold, a little vacant feeling, but the light helps.

They both slow to a stop when they see the real problem though. There's only one bed.

Steve's done this before, on school trips, and Nancy always laughs and says the girls just share, and Steve always says that it's not like that for the boys, but he'd always been King Steve, or whatever, before, and he'd also always roomed with Tommy, and so he'd *always* had the bed.

He's too tired for a fight. He's also been dethroned, according to the



gossip. "I'll just take the floor," Steve says, dropping his bag on a chair and unzipping it to dig around for his sweats.

"We can just share," Billy says. "It's a big bed."

Steve looks over his shoulder. "That's not usually what--when it's Tommy and I--"

"Wasn't he like, your best friend?"

Yes. "Sure," Steve says, shrugging.

"You Indiana boys are so fucking uptight you couldn't share a bed with your best friend?" Billy asks, rolling his eyes. "Whatever, Harrington. Sleep on the floor if that stick is too far up your ass, I guess."

Billy disappears into the bathroom and leaves Steve alone, staring at the fucking hotel room bed and wondering what he did to deserve this.

He changes into his sweats and is just starting to build a blanket nest on the floor when he toes the carpet and thinks that it's so gross, thinks that he doesn't fucking want to sleep on the floor, thinks that he's so goddamn tired.

He leaves his t-shirt on, crawls under the blankets and rolls onto his side, back to where Billy will--presumably--sleep. He shuts his eyes and tucks his arm under his head and curls up.

"Knew you'd give in," Billy says. When Steve turns around, he's laughing, leaning against the wall. He's got a hip jutted out. He's shirtless and in basketball shorts, and it's nothing Steve hasn't seen before, in the locker room and at practice, but it's--different, in the faded light of a hotel room, when Billy's about to get into bed with him. Steve can't figure out why it is, but it's weird. He rolls back over onto his side before Billy can see his cheeks flush.

Billy's still laughing, but he turns off the light and Steve feels the weight of the bed sink when he crawls into it. Steve hasn't shared a bed with anyone since Nancy and it's--weird, but also kind of nice, not being all alone in the dark. "Night, Harrington," Billy says.

Steve thinks it sounds like Billy's facing his back. Like if Steve scooted a few inches backwards, he'd bump into him. He doesn't know why he's so stuck on that fact. "Night," he says and thinks, hopes, prays that because someone else is in this bed, that because he is not alone in the dark, he'll sleep soundly for once in the last two goddamn months.

~

Steve is in an elevator and it's going down. He wants to go up, keeps hitting different floor buttons, but it hasn't stopped yet.

He watches the numbers light up as he sinks past them. 2, 1, B, L1, L2--

Finally, the elevator shudders to a stop. The doors open. The hallway in front of him is dark, no flickering lights, just blackness and the circle of light the elevator casts out, not enough to see anything.

That's when he hears it, something like footsteps, something like slurping, something like the trill of an animal on the hunt.

He knows that sound, had known it in the junkyard, had called out for it to come and get him, but in this elevator he's alone, and he doesn't have his bat.

Steve goes to press the door close button, but he misses, presses door open. "Shit," he says, and tries again, misses again, tries again, misses again. He's trying so goddamn hard, but every time he presses the wrong button, and the doors stay open, and the sound comes closer.

He stops watching the hallway, grabs his wrist in his other hand, tries to guide his shaking finger to the button, but he misses, he misses, he *misses--*

Steve looks up just as the demodog comes into view. It's got something in its mouth. A--a hand, it's dragging a body, it's got--

It's him. The body it's dragging is him. It drops him when it looks up, sees the him in the elevator, the one who can't press the button right. He's trying, he's trying, he can't--

It's mouth opens to show it's teeth and all that red. It lunges.

Steve wakes up screaming.

"Jesus, *fuck*," a voice says and a hand slaps over his mouth. Steve startles, tries to throw himself away from the hand, but as he almost tips out of the bed, a hand on his wrist yanks him back in. He's fighting, twisting against the grip, chest heaving. "Holy fuck, calm down, Harrington, okay, okay, fuck," and then Billy lets him go and Steve launches backwards, topples out of the bed, smacks his shoulder on the end table going down.

He yelps in pain, because it fucking hurt, but the pain is grounding, too. He lands on his ass, clutching his shoulder, hair stuck to his face.

Billy turns the light on.

Steve doesn't really know what he looks like, but Billy's expression is a mix of horrified and interested, so he can guess. He's never been so fucking embarrassed in his entire life. "I should have warned you," he says, pushing his hair up off his face. "Sorry."

"What the hell happened to you, Harrington?" Billy asks, sitting up in bed. The covers are pooled around his hips, hiding his shorts, and he looks naked from this angle. Steve's face is already flushed red from the nightmare, from the embarrassment, so he thinks he's probably off the hook for getting caught thinking about Billy sitting naked in bed.

"Nothing," Steve says, like it's the truth. He wants to tell Billy, which is weird, he hasn't felt the urge to tell anyone, doesn't even talk about it with Nancy. Sometimes he'll talk about it, with Joyce, but not often. He doesn't see her much, except sometimes, when he's terrified in the middle of the night and drives to her house like she doesn't have enough of her own problems. "I just have nightmares. I always have."

Billy scoffs. "Right, because Tommy would definitely keep it a secret from me that you scream and cry in your sleep. Seriously, what the fuck?"

Steve drags a hand over his face and realizes the wetness there isn't sweat. His face burns. "I need to piss," he mumbles, getting to his feet and disappearing into the bathroom. He washes his face with the tap on as cold as he can get it, then sits down on the cool floor, his back to the door. He strips off his t-shirt and scoots down, lies so his back is against the cold tile and stares at the ceiling.

The bathroom light flickers. He shuts his eyes.

Maybe he can sleep here, he finds himself thinking, and then he won't have to worry about any more questions from Billy. Maybe he can sleep here and it'll be fine.

He's halfway to dozing off when there's a knock on the door and then it pushes open. He wishes he'd fucking locked it.

"Jesus," Billy says, for the four millionth time in the last twenty minutes.

Steve opens his eyes and blinks up at him. "What do you want?"

"You're not sleeping on the bathroom floor. Come on," Billy says, leaning over. He grabs Steve under the arms and lifts, and honestly, Steve's a little impressed at the strength, because he doesn't want to be standing up and definitely isn't helping, but then Billy's got him up enough that if he lets go, Steve's going to fall, so with *extreme reluctance*, Steve gets his feet under him and they're standing together in the tiny bathroom of this stupid hotel, both of them shirtless. Steve wants to fucking go *home*.

"Just come back to bed," Billy says and Steve chooses, very deliberately, not to interrogate his brain about the way his stomach twists up when Billy says that.

They sleep with the light on that night. And the rest of the trip. Steve's dad was right, the trip did give Steve a better idea of what he wants, just probably not in the way he was hoping.

II.

"No, really," Max is saying, three weeks later and standing in Steve's kitchen. "Let him do it. I swear. It'll blow your mind."

Steve is *supremely skeptical* about the whole thing, but there are five hungry eighth graders sprawled around his parents' living room and one standing in front of him with her arms crossed and her face set and he's willing to try just about anything.

It's been three weeks since the field trip and Steve has discovered that he now has two shadows, the second being Billy Hargrove.

It does make babysitting easier, though. Or well, honestly it's more like hanging out with the kids, but Steve always used to get out-voted because it was six to one, and honestly more like eight to one considered El has super powers, but Billy's a force of fucking nature and he seems to count as ten votes. Steve has had to make a lot less last minute runs for pizza and popcorn because Billy's said no.

They still have to feed the kids, though. Billy has just offered to cook and Steve is picturing his dad's face when his parents get back from New York and the house is a smoldering pile of ashes, but Max has a lot of confidence about this.

"Are you sure?" Steve asks.

Billy is standing next to the stove holding a pot and grinning like he's going to win. He usually counts for ten votes. Plus Max, that's eleven. Steve is screwed. He wonders if his parents have fire insurance.

"You're gonna love it," Billy says, winking, and Steve thinks that maybe he's going to die in a fire tonight.

"We don't have any groceries," Steve says. "My parents are never home. What are you going to--"

"Maxine," Billy says, chucking his keys at her.

"On it," Max answers. She catches them and runs out of the room, shouting for Lucas to help her.

"Is she about to drive your car to get groceries?" Steve asks a little dumbly.

"No," Billy says. "The last time she drove my car it was all--"

He stops, suddenly. They--as a general rule--do not ever talk about That Night.

They are saved from further conversation when Max returns, trailed by Lucas, each of them carrying a few paper bags of groceries. Steve's--confused. "What is all that?"

"Groceries," Lucas supplies helpfully. "Max and Billy and I went before we came over."

That's been especially hard to wrap his head around, the way Billy and Max had figured their shit out was one thing, but Billy has eaten no less than three meals with Max, Lucas, and his family since they'd come back from Chicago. Steve isn't privy to the details of that truce and Dustin mostly won't tell him anything about it, except to say that Billy had "made amends," whatever the fuck that means.

Anyway, Lucas spends a lot of time with Max and Billy, and was also apparently in on the Billy Is Cooking Dinner Tonight thing, so that's--a lot.

"You were planning on making dinner?" Steve says.

"You never have any food, Harrington."

"Six is a lot of people, Billy. Eight with us. Let me give you some money--" The look Billy gives him at that is dark and angry and a little bitter. Steve stops talking. "At least let me help?" he tries.

"Do not let him help!" Dustin shouts from somewhere behind them. "He burns soup!"

"It takes too long to heat up on the stove," Steve says, defensive, "So I turn the heat up and--"

"Yeah, no," Billy says. "Get out of my kitchen. Maxine, Lucas, to your positions," and Steve watches, fascinated, as Max and Lucas dive into bags and begin--doing cooking things like they've practiced it.

Billy walks over and grips him by both shoulders, "I said out," he says.

"It's *my kitchen*," Steve protests, but he lets Billy's hands, firm on his shoulders, guide him back out into the living room.

He's watching the movie with the kids a while later, sitting on the couch while El sits on the back of it and tries to braid his hair--Max has been teaching her and she only ever wants to braid Steve's hair and he can't say no to her--when Max waltzes into the living room and announces, "Dinner is served."

She sounds stately when she says it, like the maitre'd at the fancy restaurants his parents bring him to, but the mad scramble by the remaining four children toward the kitchen is anything but stately.

There's no food in the kitchen, though. A suddenly smug looking Max guides them through the house into the formal dining room. The table is set. With dishes. Nice ones, and candles, and--

And it smells fucking *amazing*.

Billy's grinning from where he's standing at the head of the table and Steve's never seen him like this. He looks loose and at ease, a little proud of himself. The smile he wears is so genuine that it makes Steve's heart stutter a bit in his chest as he watches the way it lights up that crystal clear blue in Billy's eyes.

"What is all this?" Steve finds himself asking as Dustin shoves around him and sits down.

"Dinner," Billy says. His voice is warm and low. Steve hopes the lighting is dim enough that no one sees him blushing.

They all sit down and Billy--serves them. "Normally," Billy's saying, "I'd serve the host first, but you monsters would probably eat us both alive and suck on our bones, so--" the kids all get food first.

It's meat. Steve can tell that much. There's vegetables, too. By the time Billy finally gets to him and all the kids are eating, Steve's mouth is fucking watering. "What is this?" he asks softly.

"Boeuf Bourguignon," Billy says, grinning. "My mom loves Julia Child."

Steve has had a lot of fancy french food in a lot of fancy restaurants. He has never, not once in his life, tasted something this fucking delicious. Max had been right. It does blow his mind.

After dinner, when the candles are out and the dishes are cleaned and the house hasn't been burned down, Nancy picks up 66% of the children to ferry them home. Lucas and Max are waiting for Billy by the Camaro, but Steve stops Billy before he walks out of the house. "Thanks," he says. "That was so good."

Billy smiles again, too real and too bright. Steve's stomach twists. "Glad you liked it," he says.

"Are you coming back tonight?" Steve asks. He doesn't really know, yet, why Billy so desperately needs a place to stay, sometimes, but in the last three weeks he's gotten used to feeling a little less alone in the dark. Whenever Steve's parents are out of town, he can almost guarantee a visit from his second shadow.

Billy shakes his head. "Gotta do some stuff for my dad early," he says, looking a little shifty, in the way he always does when he talks about his dad. "See you at school," he adds.

Steve waves to the kids as they drive away, watches Lucas and Max talking animatedly to each other through the window, watches until the Camaro disappears.

Steve, left standing on his doorstep, the house still smelling like Billy's cooking, is left wondering how a night with six little kids as chaperones could possibly have felt so fucking much like a *date*.

He walks back into his empty house and triple checks the door is locked. He stares at himself in the bathroom mirror. "Get your shit together," he tells himself sternly, because Billy Hargrove is maybe the best friend he's ever had, and it's only been like three weeks, and he can't let any--whatever twists in his stomach when Billy smiles--get in the way of that.

III.

When Steve pulls up to the school parking lot at 11:03pm on a



Tuesday and sees Billy's Camaro there, he parks next to it. He debates, for a second, the pros and cons of just *laying on his horn* and then driving away. He stares at the Camaro, hopes Billy might see him and get the message, but there's no answering movement inside the car. It's 11:03pm on a Tuesday and the temperature is a balmy 45°. Steve had worn a light jacket over a t-shirt all day, but it's too cold for what he suspects Billy is doing.

Steve heaves a long-suffering sight and climbs out of his car. He walks around it, to Billy's driver side, and raps his knuckles on the window. "Knock, knock," he says.

Billy jumps in the driver's seat, his eyes shooting open. Steve watches him try to orient himself, but it doesn't take him long. Billy doesn't open the door or the window, he just holds up a finger and flips Steve off. "Nice," Steve says. "Open up, sunshine." He shoves his hands into his jacket pockets and stands there, shivering a bit. 45° had felt balmy when the sun was out, maybe. Now the air is damp and cold, *raw*, Joyce would say before passing him a cigarette sitting on her front steps. Steve had gone there a lot, the first few weeks, when he couldn't sleep. He doesn't go as much anymore. He's still trying to pretend that doesn't have anything to do with Billy.

Billy, who, still sitting in the fucking car, makes him wait.

Eventually, the door does swing open. Billy's looking tired, which Steve had figured would be the case. He's looking pissed, too, his jaw set as he kicks his legs out and puts his feet on the wet pavement of the parking lot. It's enough to make Steve have to take a step back to avoid Billy's boots colliding with his shins, but it's not enough that Billy gets out of the car. He stays in his seat, facing Steve now, elbows resting on his knees and hands clasped under his chin.

So much of their friendship over the last few months has been Billy watching Steve with careful eyes. Steve hasn't seen him this on edge, really, since they've started talking. He's watching Billy carefully, if a little impatiently.

"You can't just stay in the school parking lot all night," Steve says. His hands are still in his pockets because he's fighting the urge to pinch the bridge of his nose. Steve's dad does that, more and more

now, when he's talking with Steve, and it makes him feel like fucking nothing, like a nuisance. He wants to do it now, but he thinks of feeling like a nuisance, and he looks down at Billy, and he keeps his hands in his pockets.

"What're you, the cops?" Billy asks, which are the first words he's said in the three minutes--three years, maybe, judging by how cold Steve's cheeks feel--Steve's been standing here.

Steve sighs *again*. "No, asshole," he says. "But they're the next people swinging by. The chief called me."

Billy whistles, low and quiet. "King Steve," he says, voice dripping with something mean. "Deputy." It's unusual for him to take that tone with Steve, but not--not unfamiliar. Steve knows this game, too, even if he likes it better when Billy smiles at him, soft and familiar.

"Oh fuck you," Steve says. "Come on, Billy, you know you can't just stay here all night. What were you even doing?"

He was sleeping. Steve knows that, but he asks the question anyway. In the last few weeks, he's realized that sometimes if he lets Billy answer a question--even if Steve already knows the answer--Billy's more likely to be honest. He has a working theory that it has something to do with Billy's need to control a tough situation. To be in charge of it. Maybe he should have taken a psychology class. Maybe it would take the guesswork out of being--best friends, Jesus--with Billy.

"None of your goddamn business, Harrington," Billy says, that same meanness curled around the words.

Steve's been doing this long enough now, this friends with Billy Hargrove thing, that it doesn't scare him away. He knocks his knee against Billy's and waits.

"You can't stay here all night," Billy mimics, which is not an answer to the question, and Steve definitely *does not* sound like that. "Where the fuck would you like me to go, Harrington?"

"I--" Steve starts and then stops, because he doesn't have an answer.

Steve doesn't really get it, why Billy needs a place to crash, but it's been happening more and more. He shows up at Steve's doorstep at weird hours of the night or lingers there doing homework after school, even though Steve knows Billy could do the homework in his sleep, without trying, that he doesn't need hours after school to do it.

He doesn't really know why Billy needs it, but he knows that he does.

It's just, tonight, this particular Tuesday, Steve's parents are in town. They're fucking never in town. Billy clearly knows they're around tonight, which is why he's in the school fucking parking lot, which is why Hopper had called him and Steve had stumbled down the stairs to get the phone. No one worries about calling him late because his *parents are never home*, except they were, and his dad had said "We put a phone in your bedroom for a reason and you shouldn't leave it all over the house" and his dad had said, "and tell your friends there are reasonable hours to be on the phone" and his dad had turned the page in whatever fucking document he was reading and taken another sip of scotch and hadn't noticed when Steve had slipped out of the house fifteen minutes later, Hopper's, "You get him to move or I'm going to have to," ringing in his ears.

Billy laughs, then, a little hollow, but he kicks his foot out so that his leg is stretched out between Steve's. Steve can feel where Billy's calf rests against his ankle, can feel the heat of him through both their jeans.

This is another thing Steve has noticed Billy does, this little touching that doesn't quite qualify as touching. Steve wouldn't notice, except Billy does variations of this *all the time*, like he can't quite keep himself to himself, and the first few times--after the lab, where he'd really fucking needed it--Steve had moved away from it, knocked him aside, because it had seemed *small* and *stupid* and *insignificant*, but then there had been something else in Billy's eyes when he'd done that, the same kind of something Steve sees in his own eyes, sometimes, when he's wondering if he isn't the monster, that made Steve stop moving away.

So Steve doesn't move away, even though the press of Billy's leg against his makes him feel off balance. He tells himself it's because the pressure makes him think he should shift his weight, but he can't.

He tells himself it doesn't have anything to do with the heat radiating off of Billy.

Steve still hasn't answered Billy's question, hasn't told him where else he could go.

Billy nods. "That's what I thought," he says. "But go ahead, you tell me, Harrington, and I'll go someplace else. Where can a guy park his car in this shithole town and catch a few hours of sleep? Your driveway was lookin' pretty full."

Billy checked his house first, Steve realizes. At some point tonight, Billy had driven himself over to Steve's house like he's used to doing and found his parents were home, had found no room for himself there. Steve imagines it, Billy speeding around the corner, music blasting, and then coming to a stop and looking in a window to see Steve's mother fluttering around and playing house, Steve's dad with his glass of scotch, maybe looking out the window, surveying all that his money has bought him with his back to his son because he's tired of talking with Steve about The Future.

The thought of Billy looking into the house and then driving away when he'd thought he might get to go inside and lie down turns something sour in Steve's chest. He can't look at Billy all of the sudden. He chews at his lip and shivers.

The air is cold and wet, *raw*, like Joyce would say, and Steve can feel the heat from Billy's leg like a brand on his ankle.

"Well you can't stay here," Steve says, "Or Hopper's gonna arrest you." That something he can't really name flashes in Billy's eyes. A breeze blows, cold air punctures the cloth of Steve's jacket and he shivers again. It blows the curls against Billy's forehead. They stare at each other. It's fucking cold, *raw*--

*Oh.* "I know where you can go," Steve says. "Follow me?"

Billy fucking makes him *wait*.

"Fine," Billy says. "But if I'm late to school tomorrow, that's on you."

Steve nods, but he doesn't move. A heartbeat passes, their eyes

locked, before Billy pulls his leg away from Steve's. Since the first few times it'd happened, Steve never breaks that contact first. Billy pulls his leg back, turns into the Camaro. Steve gets into his own car and drives away. He drives really fucking slowly, mostly because it's funny to watch Billy flip him off and yell at him in his rearview mirror.

They get there.

"No," Billy says when Steve gets out of his car, walks over, and raps on Billy's window again. Steve rolls his eyes and yanks Billy's door open. Billy turns in one easy, fluid motion, his legs swinging and planting on the ground. "Absolutely fucking not," Billy adds when Steve doesn't say anything. "I'm not parking outside this creepy fucking house all fucking night--"

"Actually," Steve says, pressing his knee against Billy's. He looks up when a light turns on. "I was thinking you might sleep inside it."

"*What--*" Billy starts, a breathless, angry sound. Then the front door opens.

"Steve, honey?" Joyce Byers calls, one hand on her door-frame. "Is that you?"

Steve smiles at Billy. Billy looks--

Steve isn't actually sure how Billy looks. Horrified and angry, but also a little bit afraid. "Oh come on, Billy," he says, "This house isn't creepy. It's the homiest place I've ever been." Billy's still staring at him. "Well it's too fucking cold for you to sleep in your car, dipshit, so get the fuck up. You're being rude." And Steve almost never initiates contact, but he grabs Billy's wrist and *tugs* and then Billy's standing next to him. Steve checks him with his hip, bumps him over enough to slam the door to the Camaro shut. "Hi, Joyce," he calls.

"Hi sweetheart," she says, and he can see her smile from there. "Trouble sleeping?"

Joyce Byers has a house full of two boys with enough of their own problems. Steve isn't actually sure *she* sleeps, but she always comes to

the door when he pulls up, always offers him a cigarette and the warmth of her presence. It's going on 11:30 at night, and she's just--there. Just--there for him.

"Something like that," Steve says. He wonders about the magic of a woman of whom he can ask this next question when he doesn't think he could ever ask it of his own mother. "I brought a friend," he says. "Max's brother? Do you think he could stay here tonight?"

"Of course," Joyce says, something strange passing over her face. She pulls her hand off the doorframe and rubs her upper arms, "It's raw out here tonight," she says when neither of them move. Steve's not moving because Billy's half hiding behind him, and he's not fucking budging. Steve grips Billy's wrist again, *tugs* sharply. Joyce notices. Steve can tell because she smiles. "Why don't you boys come inside?"

"No," Billy hisses near Steve's shoulder. "Harrington. Fucking absolutely not."

"Don't be rude," Steve says. He moves around behind Billy and *shoves*. It takes a few tries, but they make it to the steps. Joyce is almost laughing at them, a cigarette in one hand, a glowing bright spot on the darkness of the porch. Steve is thinking Joyce is more the bright spot than the cigarette. "Hi, Joyce," he says. "Have you--met Billy?" He has to shove Billy again, who seems to be experimenting with turning invisible if he tries hard enough. Billy stumbles a little, glares at Steve with blue eyes that could cut glass.

"I haven't met him," Joyce says. "But I've seen his handiwork." Her eyes move to Steve's face and then to Billy's, and Steve feels Billy go absolutely rigid at his shoulder. Steve leans into him a little bit, presses their shoulders together, more contact. He waits. "That said," Joyce adds, "I've heard from my son that you two have become good friends and that you're an excellent cook. It's good to meet you officially, Billy."

She holds her hand out and Steve has to elbow Billy before he takes it. Joyce smiles, bright and warm and then adds, "You still owe me a plate, you know." Steve wouldn't ever call the sound that comes out of his own mouth then a *cackle*, but it comes pretty close. He's never seen Billy blush before. It's *delightful*. "Don't worry," Joyce says,

leaning in and smiling conspiratorially, “You can cook us a meal sometime and we’ll call it even. Come in, boys, come in.”

Billy sticks close to his side when they walk into the house a little like he’s glued there. Suddenly, they go from standing on the porch to standing in her living room, and it’s like they’re in the same fucking spots they’d stood That Night, the one they don’t talk about, but which Joyce has brought up. It’s probably good that she has, Steve thinks. Neither of them are good at an elephant in the room.

The weirdest thing about standing in the room with Billy is how different it all feels. It’s not that Billy’s any less volatile or that Steve’s any less scrambling, it’s just that now Billy’s arm is pressed against his while Joyce goes and collects some pillows and a blanket from somewhere.

“Harrington,” Billy hisses. “You can’t just leave me here alone.”

“She’s not gonna eat you, Billy,” Steve says.

“I don’t know her!”

“You know Will,” Steve reminds him. Billy groans and then drops his head forward, lets his forehead land on Steve’s shoulder.

It’s close to midnight and Billy’s on edge in a way that Steve doesn’t totally know. He shifts into Billy’s touch, doesn’t pull away, wraps his arms around Billy’s waist and tugs him closer. “Are you hugging me?” Billy mumbles, and Steve can feel the warmth of his breath through the layers of his clothes.

“Shut up,” Steve says. “You’re upset about something.”

“I’m not,” Billy protests, but it’s weak and they both know it.

Steve tightens his grip and Billy still doesn’t pull away. “I can’t stay,” Steve says, because Billy hasn’t asked him to, but he knows that Billy wants him to. Billy doesn’t need to say it. Steve isn’t sure he ever would.

It’s a long moment before he feels Billy nod against his shoulder. He’s shifting again, until his face is pushed against Steve’s neck, and Steve

finds himself smoothing a palm up and down Billy's back.

Steve meets Joyce's eyes over Billy's shoulder. Her expression is a little sad. It makes Steve want to pull Billy closer into his embrace, makes him want to stay the night. She takes a few steps back, out of view, and Steve slowly pulls away. "I have to go," he says, ducking his head to meet Billy's gaze when Billy straightens up. He wants to ask if Billy's okay, but he knows that Billy will say yes whether or not he is.

He also, Steve thinks, knows that Billy isn't okay. He doesn't need Billy to admit it.

There's a long moment where Steve, staring into crystal blue, thinks he's going to press his palm to Billy's cheek, thinks of what it would mean to kiss him goodnight, but Billy's the best friend he's ever had, so.

"Bye," Steve says.

"Later," Billy answers.

Joyce comes around the corner then, blankets and pillows in hand. Steve slips back out the front door before he can decide to stay.

~

Steve finds out why Billy doesn't like to be at home at 1:45 in the morning out by the quarry with a bunch of people from Hawkins. They're having a bonfire to celebrate a successful playoff game. It's the whole basketball team and all their girlfriends, most of the football team, too. A few kids from the marching band. It's actually basically just everyone who doesn't like to stay home on a Friday night when there's something else going on. Steve's here because Nancy said he should come, but she's spent most of the night sitting on a log with Jonathan, and so Steve's spent most of the night talking with Tommy.

It's habit, maybe, but it's also kind of nice. Tommy may not have been the *best* friend, but he was, for a long time, Steve's best friend. Carol's in the middle of a story about that time when they were



twelve when they'd stolen her sister's boyfriend's car and driven it *into a pool* when there's a commotion just outside the edges of the fire, somewhere swearing, something hissed.

Tommy's over there, Steve realizes, halfway to his feet to see what the problem is. Carol rises with him, but then Tommy walks into the light, all smiles, and it's only through years of friendship that Steve knows something isn't right.

"Steve," Tommy says, voice low when he comes back over. "I forgot to get you a beer. You should go get one from over there. Right. Now."

Steve's--not totally clear on what's going on, but he nods. Carol smacks Tommy's arm and whines, and he leans over and whispers something into her ear. Steve's lingering there, wondering what secret they're sharing, when her mouth forms a little 'o' shape and she looks at him with wide eyes.

She reaches out and shoves his shoulder. "Didn't he say you needed a beer?" she asks.

"Whatever," Steve says. He thinks about not going over there, just to spite them both, but Tommy's eyes on him are serious in the same way they were when Steve was fourteen years old and kissed him, sloppy and a little confused. It is the kind of serious Tommy doesn't often bother with, but Tommy's had a lot of chances to use that against him and never has.

Steve walks over toward where the coolers are, but it's way past that, way outside the circle of light of the fire, when the music is a little duller and the trees make everything seem dark, that he sees someone slumped against a tree.

Steve's got a little flashlight on his keyring that Dustin gave him. He loves it. Something small to chase away the dark. He flicks the light on and shines it, wondering who the fuck Tommy expects him to babysit tonight, but it isn't a football player or a basketball player or even someone from the marching band who'd gotten too sloppy.

It's Billy.

Steve catalogs two important details right before Billy swears at him to get the flashlight out of his fucking face. The first is that his face is *fucked up*. The second is that he's wasted.

"Jesus," Steve says.

"That's my line," Billy slurs at him.

Steve turns the flashlight off and crouches down next to Billy. He presses the back of his palm to Billy's forehead. He's burning up, which makes sense because he hadn't been in school that day because he was home sick. It's why he wasn't really missing--or missed--at the party tonight.

The fever is less concerning than how fucking beat up Billy had looked, but Steve doesn't really know what to do with that. Billy leaning into his hand, "Feels good," he mumbles. Steve's close enough now that he can smell the booze on Billy's breath. He wrinkles his nose.

"The fuck happened to you?" Steve asks.

"I threw up," Billy explains.

"And what, it tried to fight you?"

"No," Billy says, his forehead scrunching up under the back of Steve's hand. "I threw up!"

"You said that, man. Come on. I'll take you home."

"No!" Billy practically shouts it.

"Billy, what happened?"

"I threw up--"

"You said that--"

"On the," Billy continues, "On the carpet. It's expensive. Cleaning the carpet. I just wanted a glass of water, but I threw up on the carpet and I should," he's not making a lot of sense, "I should grow up and

have gone to school today maybe then I wouldn't have thrown up on the carpet."

"What?"

"Because," Billy says, sounding irritated, "Because now Susan has to spend her Saturday cleaning the--the carpet. Get it?"

Steve doesn't. "Are you gonna throw up on me?" he asks, a little wary. Billy doesn't look great. Steve hopes he isn't contagious.

"Will you hit me if I do?" Billy asks, and it isn't angry at all, it's like he's honestly asking.

It hits Steve, then. Like a fucking double decker bus.

"Billy--did your--"

Billy laughs. Long and hard and bitter. It's all the answer Steve needs. "Jesus," Steve says.

"My line," Billy reminds him. "Fuck. I'm so tired."

"Where's your car?" Steve asks. Billy waves his hand in the general direction of where most of them parked. "Don't move," Steve says. "Seriously. Stay here."

He's walking back through the trees before he can talk himself out of it. He's hoping Tommy and his serious eyes--meant it. "Hey," Steve says, coming up behind him and poking him in the shoulder.

Tommy, when he turns back around, looks a little searching. "What's up, Stevie?"

Steve grimaces at him for the nickname. "I need you to drive my car home. You can bring it to your place. I'll get it tomorrow."

"He drove?" Tommy asks, his voice low. "I tripped over him, man. He was wasted."

"I need you," Steve says again, "To take my car home. Can you do that?"

Tommy nods, that serious look still on his face. "Sure," he says.

Steve drops the keys back in his palm. When he gets back to Billy, Billy says, "Thought you weren't comin' back."

"And miss out on a night with you? I don't think so," Steve says, keeps his voice even. "Gotta stand up now, okay?"

It takes for fucking *ever* to get Billy to the Camaro. The argument about whether or not Steve is going to be allowed to drive the car takes another fifteen minutes. It ends with Steve in the driver's seat and an increasingly agitated Billy trying to melt the skin of his face with the heat of his gaze alone, but they make it back to Steve's house--thankfully emptied of his parents--without anyone getting any more hurt than they were to start with.

"Let's go clean you up," Steve says.

"I wanna go to bed," Billy answers.

"We need to--"

"Bed," Billy says in a voice that Steve finds himself incapable of saying no to. Billy's going to get blood on his sheets, probably. He's also so gross and sick. Steve is definitely going to get gross and sick. It doesn't, he finds, matter. He's not saying no to Billy. They're apparently going directly to bed.

They've been sharing a bed on and off for a while, now, but it's not like they cuddle, or anything. They're just--not alone, just two guys sharing a bed voluntarily because it's better that way, or something.

When the lights are off and they're under the covers, Billy says, "You can't tell anyone, Harrington, I fucking mean it. I'll kill you."

Steve believes him, but, "I don't need the threat, Billy," he says. "I'm not going to tell anyone."

When he rolls onto his side, Billy is facing him. Steve hesitates for a second before he reaches out and puts his hand on top of Billy's. They

lie like that for a long time. Eventually, they both fall asleep.

IV.

“You got me sick,” Steve whines into the phone a few days later. “I think I’m dying, Billy. I’m so disgusting. You got me sick.”

Billy’s calling him from a payphone by the grocery store, just to see how he’s doing. Billy really is the best friend he’s ever had. “You don’t know that,” Billy says. “Answer the original question. Are you a chicken and pasta soup person or a chicken and rice soup person?”

“You shared your gross germs with me,” Steve continues.

“And now I’m trying to share my excellent cooking with you,” Billy says. “What kind of fucking soup do you want?”

“I don’t like your tone,” Steve says, then hangs up the phone.

He’s maybe like, a little bit too dramatic when he’s sick.

Billy still shows up, though. Steve hears the Camaro, hears the rustling of someone coming into his house with grocery bags, smells something good wafting up the stairs. He’d been planning on continuing to sulk, but it smells really good, and Steve hasn’t eaten in a day and a half, so he wraps himself up in his blanket and waddles down the stairs and into the kitchen.

“You look like a burrito,” Billy says, looking up from where he’s standing next to the stove.

“You’re making two soups,” Steve says, staring wide-eyed at the two pots.

Billy looks a little shifty. “You didn’t tell me which one you liked better,” he says. “You were busy being really fucking dramatic.”

“You’re making me two soups because you want me to feel better,” Steve says, because his brain is catching up, it’s just taking him a second.

“No,” Billy answers, because he’s really fucking stubborn like that.

Steve shuffles closer, until he's right next to Billy, until he can open his blanket cocoon and wrap it around Billy, too. They haven't hugged, really, except for that night at Joyce's house. It's mostly little touches with them--and the bed sharing, obviously, it's totally normal. It's fine. Steve, though, feels sick and tired from it, and cold, too, and Billy's warm and making him two different kinds of very similar soup and they're both going to taste *amazing* and that makes Steve feel warm like Billy makes Steve feel warm.

"You're going to get me sick," Billy says, but it's a half-hearted protest and he wraps his arms around Steve and steps into the blanket cocoon anyway.

Steve leans his temple against Billy's and breathes in the steam from the soup. He really doesn't get how Billy's such a good cook. "I like chicken and rice," he says, finally.

"I do, too," Billy says, turning to look at him, and Steve's a little surprised about that, so he turns to look at Billy, too, and their noses bump and then their lips brush and it's just a little touch. Steve's ready to apologize, to say it was an accident, because Billy's the best friend he's ever had, only--

Only Billy presses in closer and tilts his head. He runs his tongue along Steve's bottom lip, and when Steve opens his mouth, Billy kisses him, really *kisses* him, warm and deep and tasting a little bit like herbs and home.

When they stop kissing, Billy leans their foreheads together and doesn't say anything, but he means *was that okay* and Steve knows that, doesn't need him to say it.

Steve steps in a little bit closer to Billy's warm and nods. Billy lets him stand there, one arm around Steve, probably sweltering in the blanket cocoon that Steve's still got him in, until the soup's done.

They eat it on the couch, Steve sprawled across Billy's lap.

It's the best fucking soup he's ever had.

**Author's Note:**

I'm @lymricks on tumblr and honestly I don't usually do fluff so I don't know if this counts but there was illness and soup and bed sharing and limited sadness so this is better than I usually do, maybe?

<3